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**GOVT FAILS ANGANAWADI WORKERS AND CHILDREN**

**By Kathyayini Chamaraj**

Recent reports say that 25 children died due to malnourishment during the last 10 months in Raichur district in Karnataka. Parallelly, photos of thousands of anganwadi workers flooding the road and flyover from the railway station to Freedom Park in Bengaluru filled the papers. They were protesting against the proposed privatisation of anganwadis, demanding regularisation, higher salaries, social security, etc. Both news items point to the failure of the state in ensuring the right to life of innocent children and the right to livelihood and decent working conditions of the children's caretakers.

Public interest litigations, year-long court hearings, fulsome assurances by government advocates, affidavits promising much by officials, reports and action plans by several committees including one by a sitting judge, all these do not seem to have brought about any change either in the situation of the children or their caretakers.

Anganwadis continue to be in short supply, especially in urban areas, despite an SC ruling that the ICDS should be universalised and there should be one anganwadi for every 1000 population. Many anganwadis are without their own buildings, toilets, and playgrounds.

Governments notify lands for acquisition to allot individual sites, many upwards of 2,400 sq ft, to the well-to-do and sanction thousands of acres of land to corporates, all at subsidised rates. But acquiring land for essential social infrastructure such as for anganwadis is never on their agenda, it seems. Hence, anganwadis are supposed to be located in rented premises identified by the community.

If the community fails in this, then they get no anganwadi, though the SC has ruled that the Department of Women and Child Development (DW&CD) must start an anganwadi within three months if a demand for one comes from the community, where at least 40 children of 0-6 years are present.

Now lately, the pittance that was being offered as rental amount for running an anganwadi in a city like Bengaluru has been raised to Rs 5,000 but with so many conditionalities on the house owner that he is better-off renting it to someone else. A ray of hope was provided by the DC of Bengaluru (Urban) recently, in the light of the protests regarding encroached lands when he announced that land re-acquired by the government would be used for opening anganwadis.

Since anganwadis function only from 9.30 am to 4 pm (earlier only up to 12 noon), they do not serve the need of working women for full day-care for their children aged 0 to 6 years. This is the crucial age when children are becoming malnourished because it is mostly their older girl-sibling who is caring for them. There is a parallel Rajiv Gandhi National Creche Scheme to provide day-care for children 0-6 years under which Karnataka has a mere 1592 creches serving 39,800 beneficiaries as per a study in 2013.

**Underpaid workers**

Most anganwadis lack play equipment, space for play, storage space for food grains and separate kitchens for preparing the hot cooked meals mandated to be served as per a Supreme Court directive. Anganwadi workers are also underpaid and overworked with myriad duties being imposed upon them. So much so that they are neither able to provide adequate care for the pregnant and lactating mothers, adolescent girls and 0-3 year-old babies nor provide proper nutrition and pre-school education to the 3-6 year-olds.

On the other hand, Section 11 of the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act of 2009 mandates government elementary schools to also provide pre-primary education. Shifting the pre-primary education of 3-6 year-olds to the government elementary school from the anganwadi would provide the much-needed additional worker, as pre-school teacher at the elementary school to care for the 3 to 6 year-olds. The 3 to 6 year-olds of working women could be retained in the school till their mothers come and fetch them.

The government elementary schools are currently facing dwindling numbers of children given the rush for private English medium schools. But they are, relatively speaking, better equipped than anganwadis. Many of them have playgrounds with play equipment and, anyway, hot cooked midday meals are being supplied or cooked there under better conditions. They have the added advantage that the 3-6 year-old's readiness to transit to the primary school improves greatly if he/she is already acclimatised to the environment of the primary school.

Anganwadis could then be converted to crèches to provide universalised day-care for the 0-3 year-olds only, in addition to giving adequate care to the pregnant and lactating mothers and adolescent girls. Parallelly, the anganwadi worker, if she has to work full-time at the day-care centre, will have to be made a regular government employee and provided ESI, PF, pension, etc. considering that she is working to meet several national and Millennium Development Goals.

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